Goodbye Beauty. Normativity in Contemporary Visual Arts

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1. In the Beginning Was Beauty

Our intuitions related to art are generally associated with ideas such as creativity, freedom of expression, and experimentation. In fact, however, as noted in the introductory essay of this collection,[1] the fact that so many artists (especially writers – but also musicians, painters, and performance artists) are or have been people with training in legal disciplines should be taken into account when considering the apparently extrinsic relationship between art and law. It may be that this is just a coincidence, or it may be that art, whatever definition of it we decide to take, really shares something profound with the law.

On one point, in particular, philosophy can help to solve this issue. We know that the history of the liberal arts has been deeply intertwined with the history of beauty. At least until the beginning of the twentieth century – that is, until Marcel Duchamp presented *Fountain* at the competition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 – it was rather obvious that creating a work of art meant creating something beautiful. The lemma *beautiful* was used to synthesize a wide range of meanings and nuances of a mainly aesthetic nature, which had to do with formal and compositional notations, depending on the art form and the case in question. Basically, judging a book as good or a painting as beautiful roughly meant enunciating a judgment of taste related, respectively, to the quality of the writing and the narrative contained in the book (it is well written, the story works), or with the formal and expressive qualities of the painting.

Duchamp, as we will see, did two important things: i) he introduced the idea that a readymade – i. e., an artifact of which the artist did not alter any property – can be a work of art, and ii) he advanced the hypothesis, as argued explicitly in the article entitled *The Richard Mutt Case*, that works of art can be anaesthetic and therefore can escape what until then had seemed to be an intrinsic necessity of the definition of art – i. e., beauty. Something can be neither »beautiful« nor

1 Cf. Gephart / Leko in this volume, pp. 8 et seqq.

»ugly« and yet still be a work of art.[2] Mr. Mutt, the pseudonym Duchamp used to sign *Fountain*, had done nothing but choose an object of everyday life, give it a title, and present it at an art competition. By doing so, Duchamp created a new way of looking at that object. Between the lines of Duchamp's gesture we can read what the artist later described lucidly and what, at first sight, seems to lead rather in the direction of the gap between art and the law (meaning by »law« any form of normativity).[3] I will return at length to this point. For now I wish to note that before 1917, the date that art history interprets as a break from Vasari's canon, things did not go as they did *after* Duchamp.

Therefore, we can speak of a time *before* and a time *after* Duchamp. Before Duchamp, art was deeply tied to beauty. The canons of interpretation organized by philosophy to theoretically account for them appropriately referred to sensitivity and perception. In this sense, art has to do with the ways in which we perceive the world, because beauty is perceived primarily through our sense organs. Where there is beauty, there is sensitivity, and where there is sensitivity, there is judgment of taste – which, as Immanuel Kant states in the *Critique of Judgment*, has an inherently normative structure. Before returning to contemporary art to try to understand if indeed Duchamp has ousted any kind of aesthetic normativity from artistic production, I will briefly examine the reasons that, in the eighteenth century, led the aesthetic judgment related to pre-Duchamp art to be considered as intrinsically normative.

2. The Universality of Beauty

The question we have to answer is the following: When we make a judgment of taste looking, say, at the *Mona Lisa*, what does that mean exactly? What do we mean when we say that »the *Mona Lisa* is beautiful and an absolute masterpiece of Western art«? This statement contains a judgment of taste (the *Mona Lisa* is beautiful) and an artistic judgment (it is a masterpiece of Western art). In what follows I will show that i) the two judgments are different, ii) both judgments have

2 I will henceforth use »beautiful« instead of the generic »good« to stress the importance of the presence of *beauty* in the artwork.

3 »There was an incident, in 1912, which ›gave me a turn‹, so to speak; when I brought the ›Nude Descending a Staircase‹ to the Indépendants, and they asked me to withdraw it before the opening. In the most advanced group of the period, certain people had extraordinary qualms, a sort of fear! People like Gleizes, who were, nevertheless, extremely intelligent, found this ›Nude‹ wasn't in the line that they had predicted. Cubism had lasted two or three years, and they already had an absolutely clear, dogmatic line on it, foreseeing everything that might happen. I found that naïvely foolish. So, that cooled me off so much that, as a reaction against such behavior coming from artists whom I had believed to be free, I got a job.« Cabanne: Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, p. 17.

a normative nature, but the normativity of the judgment of taste refers to different elements than the artistic judgment, and, finally, iii) contemporary visual arts require the formulation of an artistic judgment rather than a judgment of taste.

According to Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, particularly where he addresses the question of the epistemological status of the judgment of taste, by formulating the judgment of taste (the *Mona Lisa* is beautiful), we are arguing in favor of the idea that we who are looking at the *Mona Lisa* right now at the Louvre like the *Mona Lisa* and think that it is unquestionably beautiful, whatever that means (subjectivity of the aesthetic judgment). At the same time, however, according to Kant, we expect that anyone who has seen or will see the *Mona Lisa* can only find it beautiful and, therefore, can only express the exact same judgment. It therefore seems that there is a tension between the idea that judgments of taste (i. e., judgments which generally relate to matters subject to taste) are subjective (i. e., depend on the subjects that formulate them) and the idea that they aspire to achieve broad, even universal, consensus. In other words, they seem to be both subjective (individual) and objective (normative). So the judgment of taste claims to be normative – i. e., to establish itself as a rule that applies to everyone, not just the one who formulates it.

Before addressing, albeit briefly, the Kantian discourse, it is important to explain what I mean when I speak of »normativity.« In these pages I will adopt a broad conception, so to speak, of normativity: I will claim not only that normativity corresponds to the awareness that something can be correct or incorrect but also that certain judgments can be better than others. As is well known to scholars, in recent years much attention has been devoted to the notion of normativity, and this is true both for general philosophy and for its specific areas, primarily ethics and epistemology. What should we do? And what should we believe? What is the theoretical core, if there is one, of the metaphysical concept of normativity? How, finally, does normativity relate to judgment?

As much as the relationship between normativity and aesthetic judgment is not as immediately obvious as, say, the relationship between normativity and ethics, it is also true that, as I anticipated, the subjectivism we often deem to be connected to the judgment of taste contrasts with an intuition of common sense, according to which the judgment of taste requires sharing, or universality. This means that judgments of taste regarding properties like beauty or ugliness are universal, i) because they are formulated thanks to dispositions that are universally present in the subjects, or ii) because they capture certain objective properties of things. In other words, the universality of the judgment of taste can be based both on knowledge of the subject and on the presence or absence of certain properties of the things to which the judgment of taste refers. In both cases, there is a component of necessity which is related to the formulation of the judgments of taste and which constitutes their normativity.

Before Kant, the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, founder of modern aesthetics, established a systematic connection between sense perception and aesthetic properties. In one of his most important works, *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten famously defines aesthetics as a science of sensitive cognition. It deals with analyzing everything that is present to the senses: it is the science of sensitive cognition, dealing with the lower degree of cognition. Therefore, according to Baumgarten's definition, aesthetics is the faculty that makes use of sensible representations that are indistinct: unclear or confused. In this framework, the judgment is the representation of the perfection or imperfection of things, and beauty is perfection perceived through the senses rather than through the intellect.[4]

It is clear that Baumgarten grants this new science a rather wide scope: he intends to develop a general science of sensitive cognition rather than a theory of the fine arts or the judgment of taste. Therefore, Baumgarten divides the theory of knowledge into two parts: the first, logic, concerns intellectual knowledge; the second, aesthetics, concerns instead the science of sensitive cognition and the theory of the liberal arts. The goal of the new science is to achieve the perfection of sensitive knowledge as such (i.e., beauty), while imperfection as such (i.e., ugliness) should be avoided.[5] Beauty is not, or not only, a property of things, it is rather a property that belongs to the workings of our sensitive powers when they are organized for the best.

In this frame, the question to be asked is this: What is sensitive cognition exactly and how does it work? What kind of knowledge does Baumgarten have in mind? The preferred example chosen by Baumgarten is poetry, which is formed by ideas that come from the senses. This is the reason why aesthetics, as such, is not *ratio* – that is, it is not an entirely and classically rational science – but rather what Baumgarten defines as *analogon rationis* or *facultas cognoscitiva inferior*. As a form of knowledge, poetry also uses representations that can be more or less distinct, and yet it remains a form of knowledge consisting, for the most part, of sensitive ideas. By contrast, scientific knowledge *can* be composed of sensitive ideas, but its standard organization requires the use of representations. The concept of the sensitive idea shows promise for our purposes, especially because Baumgarten seems to aspire to a new way of conceiving and organizing knowledge. More specifically, from his point of view, it is impossible to draw a definite distinction between knowledge derived from the senses and knowledge that arises from the intellect: both are necessary, and both share the same components, albeit in different ratios.

4 This is the definition of aesthetics formulated by Baumgarten in his seminal work: »Aesthetics (the theory of the liberal arts, the logic of the lower capacities of cognition [*gnoseologia inferior*], the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the *analogon rationis*) is the science of sensible cognition«. Baumgarten: Aesthetica, § 1.

5 Ibid, § 14.

Moreover, Baumgarten's outline is rather clear and linear: the lower degree of our cognition concerns sense organs, which give us access to the outside world and allow us to start the processes of representing reality. Representations, in turn, can grasp external reality in a more or less effective way. In Baumgarten's view, the perception of beauty is intimately linked to the notion of perfection. In particular, when he argues that beauty is nothing but the perfection of sensible cognition, he is saying that beauty does not belong only to the representation of things – to their formal composition, we could say – but also to the experience of sensory perception. In other words, there is a potential of beauty that can be expressed not only by the form but also by the *content* of a work, and this is true because the shape of the work may be »beautiful« for our sense faculties – i. e., to the *analogon rationis* – and its content may be »beautiful« for our theoretical reason.

From these premises Baumgarten draws some consequences regarding knowledge deriving from the arts: poetry, for example, which like all the fine arts is made by our sensitive ideas, can lead to basic knowledge and therefore have access only to the particular. Painting representing the *phantasmata* of things is also similar to poetry. It is interesting to note that wherever you can gain knowledge, there must be some form of regularity, and thus of normativity. This was exactly the consequence that Kant did not fail to derive from Baumgarten's assumptions. Starting from Baumgarten's reflections, Kant focused his analysis on three elements: i) judgment, and specifically aesthetic judgment, which is both subjective and universal; ii) the concept of beauty; and, finally, iii) the concept of normativity.

It is, in fact, the question of the *Mona Lisa*: How come, when formulating our judgment of taste on the *Mona Lisa*, we expect everyone to agree with us, as if we were expressing universal knowledge? Is beauty really, for what concerns epistemology, on the same level as good and truth? Kant believes that there is a possible tension between the freedom of the subject and universal normativity. In fact, the subject intimately participates in the formulation of the aesthetic judgment, being induced to respond emotionally to the aesthetic perception (e. g., feeling pleasure, displeasure, or even pain). However, within the judgment of taste there is not only the individual response to the aesthetic perception: there is also the awareness that the response takes place in a universal form, being thus necessarily shared and therefore normative.

Kant was not particularly interested in art and, in fact, in his perspective, the judgment of taste is aesthetic rather than artistic. However, it is certainly true that for Kant the place of normativity is beauty, wherever we are given to find it, be it in nature or in artistic production. For our purposes, it is important to clarify Baumgarten's underlining of the cognitive dimension related to aesthetics, which is, in fact, *cognitio sensitiva*: in other words, it is the imaginative and logical dimension of our knowledge: one in which knowledge remains more indeterminate and confused. The arts – and, for Baumgarten, especially poetry – allow us to

access this area of being, letting us access a less formalized dimension of reality that, as such, is marked by its own normativity.

3. The Case of Caravaggio

Let's ask ourselves, concretely, what Baumgarten means. Before doing so, we can clarify the reasons for his preference for poetry: provided that the liberal arts represent a form of knowledge, albeit inferior to intellectual knowledge, Baumgarten prefers art forms in which the semantic element is more obvious and structured. So he is particularly inclined to art forms that use words. The language of poetry is more »raw« and less logically subtle than scientific language. However, precisely because of this lesser subtlety, it captures and signifies an important sphere of reality: the obscure zone of our feelings, which we sense but do not discriminate accurately. The visual arts using the narrative style work similarly to poetry: the cognitive element is really incorporated and rendered through the properties of the work that reveal its aesthetic character.

To understand this point, let's take a classic example of Italian painting: a work by Michelangelo da Merisi, better known as Caravaggio. In *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1599–1600), the perception of the formal properties of the painting is at least as important as that of the narrative. The narrative content is expressed in a more concise, but also more direct way than the narration of the same episode as it appears in the Gospel according to Mark.[6] In Caravaggio's painting, the story of Matthew's conversion is rendered through a figuratively very detailed narrative that mainly relies on two elements: realistic precision in depicting the characters, and an artistic and anti-naturalistic use of light. The scene is set in a place similar to a tavern: a context of trade and ambiguous relations. The characters look somewhat alike, so that critics are still unsure as to which of them is Matthew. In front of the group, a man with his hand raised clearly addresses one of the diners, pointing at him. A beam of warm light enters from one side of the room, just on the side of the man he is calling, with the exact purpose of illuminating the scene, like a spotlight on the stage of a theater.

6 »Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. ›Follow me,‹ Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: ›Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?‹ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ›It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.‹« Mark 2:13–17 (NIV).

The reading of the narrative does not present too many difficulties: the man is Jesus, and the raised arm is a performative act that, instead of being told, is acted. In *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, Caravaggio continues the tradition begun by Giotto in the cycle of the Scrovegni Chapel – more precisely, within the cycle of the stories of Jesus that belong to the frescoes of the middle part of the Chapel. The gesture of Jesus, who raises his arm, is repeated several times, almost always characterized by the same traits but causing very different things to happen: among the doctors, Jesus gives lessons in the temple; he turns water into wine at the banquet of the wedding at Cana; he raises Lazarus; he enters Jerusalem blessing the crowd; he expels the money changers from the temple, and washes the feet of his disciples. Jesus's hand – which, in the way it is painted by Caravaggio, in addition to citing Giotto, also recalls the hand of Adam painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel (1508–12) – is aimed at a man whom the artist imagines to be spiritually lost.

Light is the protagonist of the story: it is not coming through the window located at the back of the table, as should happen in a naturally lit environment, nor does it come from an artificial source. It simply enters the scene from nowhere and, following the direction of Jesus's hand, it emphasizes the power of his action. The light makes it so that what really matters (the face of Jesus, his hand, the gathering of tax collectors, among which is Matteo) emerges from darkness and acquires importance by standing out from all that is around, giving the scene an effect of powerful dramatization. The Caravaggio painting undoubtedly uses some aesthetic properties (the strong mimetic characterization, a particularly powerful – and therefore not transparent, but semantically dense – use of color) and some other elements that I will call artistic to distinguish them from the purely perceptual or aesthetic ones.[7]

The artistic component presents a particularly interesting conceptual dimension and can be detected in some specific parts of the painting: for example, there is the particular use of light, which not only has the task of facilitating the interpretation of the painting by bringing out the narrative told in the canvas but also generates the symbolism related to light and the relationship between light and divinity. Then there is Jesus's hand, which quotes Michelangelo (saying something about itself only to those who know a bit of art history) and refers to Giotto's poetic, in which divine power is embodied in Jesus's agentive power.

It is undeniable that access to the narrative contained in this painting is made possible by Caravaggio's use of color and light, and that it therefore depends very

[7] I adopt here Danto's distinction between aesthetics and philosophy of art: Danto, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. Unlike Danto, however, I believe that the aesthetic dimension also has in itself a cognitive dimension and therefore can be distinguished from the merely perceptive one. The artistic dimension is even more complex and also includes knowledge of a historical-cultural nature.

clearly on our sensitivity. There is *cognitio*, yes, but it is *sensitiva*. All that Caravaggio means to convey is told using tools that primarily touch the strings of sensitivity: sensitive perception is stressed both by the use of color and by the work's beauty arousing an aesthetic experience in the viewer. Basically, we can very well imagine a viewer who knows nothing of the story told by Caravaggio and is unable to decipher the symbolism contained in the use of light or the quotations hidden in the hand of Christ. And yet, despite this, we can imagine that this observer would easily experience the aesthetic normativity that governs the particular way of using the aesthetic properties of light and color.

The judgment of taste on the work of Caravaggio in general, and on this painting in particular, is both unique and universal – that is, it belongs to each person individually, and yet in another sense it is universal. This judgment, let it be noted, is strictly aesthetic: it is not about the artistic life of the work which, to be understood, necessarily requires the knowledge of the interpreter, and which may or may not follow aesthetic cognition. In a word, it can certainly be argued that the artistic judgment requires aesthetic cognition; it depends on it, and is not itself necessary, in the sense that a basic understanding of the work can very well stop at the aesthetic sphere.

4. Contemporary Art: Concept and Normativity

We mentioned that, since Duchamp introduced the readymade in museums alongside »normal« works of art, the ontological question and the question of definition have become urgent. Readymades, if they are considered in the same way as other works of art, pose an eminently definitional problem, imposing the need to answer the following question: What is a work of art, since an ordinary object, specifically an artifact, is treated as a work of art despite the fact that no physical property has been added to or subtracted from the object?

Stated differently, the important caesura determined by contemporary art, specifically by the Dada movement and abstract expressionism, seems to really question the idea that access to the understanding of art is given by sensitivity. The whiteness of the urinal – i.e., the properties of the color white – was certainly not the reason that prompted Duchamp to present a urinal built in series at an art competition. As the artist himself explained, he didn't expect the audience to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of *Fountain*. If anything, the opposite was true: Duchamp was interested in the *an*aesthetic dimension, since his goal was to create a work of art prescinding from the use of traditional aesthetic properties, first of all beauty.

The realization of readymades thus has two fundamental theoretical objectives:

i) to show the anaesthetic character of art, liberating it from the requirement of beauty, and ii) to significantly increase the conceptual content embedded in the work. Such content is definitely also present in *The Calling of St. Matthew* by Caravaggio; however, it is structured in a more explicit language and in ways that are easy to understand if only you have the essential key to the work: the narrative of the sacred scriptures. *Fountain*, on the other hand, is neither beautiful nor ugly: rather, it may relate to the category of »disgusting« things, which is why we think Duchamp exhibited it in the way that he did (almost upside down, in a manner that does not evoke the position associated with its ordinary use) – in order to tell us something.

The pursuit of »anaestheticness« is what distinguishes readymades from abstractism in which – think, for instance, of the works by Kazimir Severinovič Malevič – color is still a determining element (which, in our example, identifies the poetic of the Russian artist). In other words, Malevič's abstract paintings are surely closer to *The Calling of St. Matthew* than *Fountain* and other readymades, for which, in fact, it does not seem possible to call for any judgment of taste, and, consequently, there seems to be no aesthetic normativity to which to refer. The hypothesis that I intend to verify is that the issue of normativity in contemporary arts is subject to a revision of the definition of the very concept of art. In other words, it is necessary to reconsider the concept of art if we wish to examine the normativity of contemporary art.

4.1. Definition

It is worth noting that the philosophical research of definitions has ancient origins and is enlivened by the idea that basic knowledge relies upon concepts for which we have identified the necessary and sufficient conditions. Platonic dialogues demonstrate this point in a masterly fashion. Socrates's strategy often involves pointing out to the interlocutor how, in spite of their ostentatious confidence, people rarely possess a definition for what they claim to have knowledge of (which means, according to the Platonic standard, that they rarely possess knowledge). This might seem to be of little importance considering that we are able to get by relatively well even by following imprecise notions and cognitions.

Everyday life is overflowing with the problems that Plato warned us about. If a resurrected Plato were to ask us to define the word »bachelor«, what would we respond? Typically, those who are able to recognize a bachelor when they see one would respond by saying: »A bachelor is an unmarried adult male.« The definition is composed of two concepts: »male« and »unmarried adult«. This means, to put it simply, that in order for an individual to be a candidate for the definition of »bachelor«, he must possess certain characteristics: he must be a male, he must

be an adult, and, of course, he must not be married. Should these conditions not be fulfilled contemporaneously – perhaps because the candidate is a woman or an adult male who is married – the person with whom we are dealing would not be a bachelor.

In order for the definition of »bachelor« to fulfill its objectives, it is necessary to determine the properties shared by all bachelors, after which it is necessary to identify the properties that distinguish bachelors from similar classes, such as that of »husbands«. The philosophy of artworks, in a similar fashion, attempts to identify the properties shared by all works of art in order to determine the properties that distinguish artworks from classes of similar objects, such as artifacts. I have dealt with the question of the definition of contemporary arts elsewhere.[8] Here it is useful to simply recall the definition I sketched:

A work of art is a social object, an artifact, that embodies a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace upon a medium that is not transparent.

I will call this a »quasi-definition«, which means that it is not a definition provided in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions but rather of necessary conditions only. This requires some brief clarifications. I will do this by giving some examples, starting from particular artworks.

Oftentimes, though not always, artists are able to create works whose representational content means something for our mind and, at the same time, for our emotions. This is the reason why, as Nietzsche observed, artworks can affect our lives more than a well-formulated argument can. Evidence of this can be found in Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, a film with the impressive duration of twenty-four hours. Cinematography has more than a few examples of long (and extremely long) films. Nonetheless, *The Clock* is a true gem of cinematographic assemblage in which the separation between reality and the world of fiction marks the almost absolute fading of the boundaries of temporality. Time, which is measured and indicated with obsessive constancy throughout the entire film, coincides with that of our lives in an astonishing way. The spectator realizes this immediately – at first with surprise, and then by experiencing mounting unease combined with authentic enjoyment. Time passes and is measured; it is spoken of and considered throughout the whole film, for twenty-four extraordinary hours. It is measured not only by clocks that capture its rhythm but also by memory, which travels through Marclay's excerpts, contextualizes them, and experiences the irony of scenes that belong to a black-and-white past, only to open themselves to a world of colors. Across time, the answers to some of the most challenging questions are dealt with, some of which, after having been brought up in one scene, are answered in a different one, almost in a new temporal dimension.

[8] Andina: The Philosophy of Art.

The film indirectly proposes a reflection on a classical metaphysical question: »What is time?«[9] It also shows a possible way to find an answer: by means of the relation between time and memory. After all, even public and shared time is always marked by individual memory, and this is the first intuition that Marclay expresses in his work. Marclay literally shows the passing of time – as its passing is the only thing we know about it – and marks it with his own memory, making up his work with the films of his personal film library. Time passes for all, it is true, and the recording of this fact is certainly universal, at least for humans. However, the time of *The Clock* is a very personal time belonging to its director and his memory. The second insight by Marclay is to show how one can face time only through its traces: time *coincides* with its traces. The traces of its passing, of its sedimenting in things chosen and things discarded. Therefore, Marclay speaks of time through his memory of cinema, which is itself a cinematic work.

Let's take another example. This is a work of art that is very much tied to social and civil commitment at the expense of meta-conceptual mannerism, to which twentieth-century art was often inclined. *World of Matter* is a multimedia project providing an open-access archive on the global issues of resource exploitation and circulation. To quote the project disclaimer:

> World of Matter is an international art and media project investigating primary materials (fossil, mineral, agrarian, maritime) and the complex ecologies of which they are a part. Initiated by an interdisciplinary group of artists and scholars, the project responds to the urgent need for new forms of representation that shift resource-related debates from a market-driven domain to open platforms for engaged public discourse.
>
> The project seeks to develop innovative and ethical approaches to the handling of resources, while at the same time challenging the very assumption that the planet's materials are inevitably a resource for human consumption.[10]

The programmatic intents of *World of Matter* are interesting for several reasons: firstly, because they are a collective of artists who work at a shared goal, a little as if it were a group of scientists investigating the same theoretical hypothesis, and, secondly, because the basic idea, clearly spelled out, is that to understand some particularly crucial events of today's world, you have to build a new representation, that is, a new way of looking at that world. The aim is precisely to offer people alternative representations of the world in which they live, ones that are able to question the more established representations promoted by mass culture.

This is also the aim of the works of Ursula Biemann, a Swiss artist who tries to render through her lens both the psychological and social dynamics of migration (*Sahara Chronicle*) and the trans-generational effects of phenomena like the

9 Cf. St. Augustine: Confessions, book XV, 14.17.

10 For further details, see: http://www.worldofmatter.net/about-project.

exploitation of natural resources and climate change (*Deep Weather*). Biemann deals with video art and, more precisely, with what the artist defines as »video essays«. To clarify this neologism, we might refer to the idea that art, all art, embodies meanings. Biemann seems to be convinced of this to the point of comparing her production (video) to a category that normally does not refer to art genres but scientific works (essay). *Deep Weather* (2013, video, 9') is a video essay, which is different from a video story. The aim is not simply to record facts – which typically happens with news reports – but to offer a world view related to the facts recorded. This means that the artist is fully aware of the artistic scope of her work as well as of the aesthetic scope, which makes the artistic one even more powerful.

Another interesting element concerns the use of the emotional element, which is generally very present in art, and which we would expect to be present, even more significantly, in works such as those by Biemann, as they address issues with a high emotional impact. Yet, the artist decides to make her work unemotional: if the mass media tend to underline the emotional aspect of these issues through a violent use of images, Biemann presents the *problem* in eminently critical terms. While the emotion is reduced to zero, the two video essays are strongly characterized in aesthetic terms. They are certainly very beautiful – not only made using sophisticated techniques but endowed with a strong aesthetic element.

Unlike what happened to much of the twentieth-century avant-garde, for which art consisted mainly in researching its own metalanguage, today artists focus on social and political responsibility as a fundamental element of their production. So let's go back to the definition proposed above:

A work of art is a social object, an artifact, that embodies a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace upon a medium that is not transparent.

Works of art are social objects because their creation – even when the artist's intervention on the object is minimal, as in readymades – presupposes the artist's intentionality. It is Duchamp's artistic project that allows *Fountain* to become an artwork, and that project marks the difference between *Fountain* and any other Bedfordshire urinal. In the same way, Biemann's project marks the difference between the skillful shooting of migrants landing by a reporter and Biemann's video. In all the cases we have examined, the artistic project is fundamental and involves both the work on art's own expressive potential – in other words, art's reflection on its being a medium – and the representations through which the artist manifests his or her world view.

Now, it is evident that the ontological variety of contemporary art implies a multiplicity of forms and ways in which the incorporation of the conceptual trace takes place: a filmic documentary work has different characteristics and therefore different ways and possibilities of incorporating meaning from those of other forms of visual art, for example, sculpture or painting. Video art, like perform-

ing art, allows the artist to incorporate the traces of more complex and, in some ways, more structured narratives. I introduced the idea of *conceptual trace*, which I prefer to that of concept, because even with the most explicit and structured narratives, such as Biemann's works, it is evident that a reality shown and told in artistic ways – involving an articulate project and a complex narrative – is different from the philosophical reflection on the same reality. The trace embodied in artworks is a signifying element that the artist inscribes in the work and that viewers complete in their own ways, which can be more or less sophisticated and elaborate. The interpretative boundaries, the argumentative and logical structure of the meaning exposed, the use of the emotional element: all these things mark a difference between the significant trace embodied in artworks and the conceptual structure found in philosophy. The latter is what makes use of our superior cognition, whereas art, as noted by Baumgarten, triggers a *cognitio inferior*.

Finally, the medium. The non-transparency of the medium plays a decisive role in distinguishing artworks from their non-artistic counterparts. If, in traditional arts (especially in painting, sculpture, literature, and architecture), the medium contributes in decisive ways to distinguishing the work of art from ordinary objects, the greater variety of types of media – both material and agentive – used by contemporary art often seems to reduce the medium to almost total invisibility, while the semantic trace contained in the work acquires a predominant value. However, the medium can never be completely transparent: if it were so, we would lose the demarcation that distinguishes art from reality and allows art to be. This is a boundary between two different epistemological assets: the domain of art admits fiction as a constitutive possibility; reality does not.

By »non-transparency« I mean the idea that the medium must connote the fictional space to which the work belongs. Biemann's video essay is distinguished from a documentary, as well as from documentary photography, by two basic elements: it does not intend to render reality objectively and it does not intend to simply document it. In other words, it is not a news report. Rather, its aim is a representation that, in Biemann's case, is as realistic as possible: on closer inspection, its hyperrealism is used to enhance the impact of artistic representation. The story of the migration in Saharan Africa, in particular, is not only rendered through very beautiful pictures but is also »purged« from any emotion.

Migrants themselves lucidly express their arguments, never pathetically. The main consideration is usually along the following lines: »The poverty and misery into which we are forced in many countries do not allow us to provide for our families. We cannot just sit and wait. We all have the right to liberty and to movement: we must be able to work, get money or, at least, what is necessary for us and our families.« Which is to say: you Europeans represent yours as a cultural context in which human rights are protected but let other people (non-Europeans) be deprived of these very rights. And it is beyond doubt that the right to survival and

movement belong to the category of fundamental rights. Is this not an obvious contradiction? And if we are to argue in a different direction, what is our definition of right? How do we identify fundamental rights? What reasons allow us to disregard the respect for fundamental rights? To deal with such questions, a greater analysis is required, an analytical *cognitio intellectiva* that involves philosophy and other human sciences, but which Biemann's video makes immediately evident.

4.2. Normativity

What does this all have to do with the issue of the normativity of aesthetic judgment? The key point in the case of the judgment of taste is the question of its universality, and therefore its normativity. Now, we have seen that, for a long time, aesthetic normativity had as a prerequisite the idea of beauty. However, since artists freed themselves from beauty, the bond between art and the universality of the judgment of taste has become problematic. To face the crisis of normativity, I have therefore proposed a revision of the concept of visual art based on three essential points: i) the meaning embedded in the work, ii) its being present in the form of a trace, rather than in the form of an organized conceptual structure, and iii) the non-transparency – i. e., the conceptual and perceptual salience – of the medium.

In this restructuring of the concept of art, the traces of meaning and the body of the work are fundamental, while the aesthetic properties of the medium are secondary. In other words, the work may or may not be beautiful – whatever that means – and therefore may or may not exhibit aesthetic properties, but the latter are not a necessary condition for its identity. It follows that there is no normativity of the judgment of taste that can be applied to contemporary art.

Let me make another observation from the point of view of the history of the concept. One of the most successful readings of all events and self-transformations that art has imposed on itself in the twentieth century is the one formulated by Arthur Danto, on the basis of what had already been somehow intuited by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he foresaw that art's fate was to be resolved in philosophy. In *The End of Art*,[11] Danto argues that the avant-garde, which pushed art to revise the limits of its own definition, brought art to the extreme limit of its possibilities, or, rather, of its own development. This is why art won't have a progressive development such as the one reconstructed by Vasari,[12] but will rather be the expression of single individuals.

The same conclusion is also found in a work by Sara Fanelli on show at the Tate Gallery, London. The 40 m long work recreates the timeline of twentieth-century

11 Danto: The End of Art.
12 Vasari: The Lives of the Artists.

art history, illustrating it through the names of its most important movements and artists. Significantly, from the year 2000 onwards Fanelli reports in her timeline only artist names. The history of art, as a history of progress, perhaps has come to an end, at least according to what we can see from the historical perspective in which we find ourselves. What must be noted is that throughout the twentieth century art has lost its possibility to call for the universality of the judgment of taste as well its historical and progressive development. Danto suggests not looking at these losses with nostalgia: after all, the counterpart of all this is a great gain, that is, the almost absolute liberty that artists have won, breaking the canons and cultural traditions and finally freeing themselves even from the demands of their patrons.

Our post-historical dimension allows us to draw a conclusion as to the issue of normativity. From our historical perspective, we know that the normativity of the judgment of taste is not about art, and, on the other hand, we have also reached a more meaningful understanding of the concept of art. We know that the visual arts, in their various forms, belong to the domain of sensitive cognition, and we know that the trace of meaning is of decisive importance to a work of art, more than its aesthetic properties. An artwork can be neither beautiful nor ugly, but it has to mean something. A great part of our relationship with an artwork and our ability to interpret it consists precisely in developing a meaningful interpretation of the semantic trace, which manifests itself in the work in the form of a non-argued-for narrative. In contemporary art, therefore, it no longer makes sense to refer to the normativity of the aesthetic judgment, while certainly normativity exists in relation to the ways in which the semantic trace is incorporated in the work.

An artwork really works – i. e., it is successful – in all those cases in which the significant trace is embodied in appropriate ways so that the viewers can have some kind of cognitive response, which can sometimes also be characterized in emotional terms. The question posed by the works of contemporary visual art is this: Does the *cognitio sensitiva* triggered by the artwork allow me to set in motion the process of interpretation? Biemann's video essays succeed in a very simple and direct way, while for people to understand something of the trace of meaning that Duchamp incorporated in *Fountain*, it was necessary that the artist wrote down his poetic. Which makes *Fountain* a less successful work than *Deep Weather*. It is unlikely that any human being would understand anything about *Fountain* unless she had studied it, read about it, or met Duchamp in person. On the other hand, none of this is needed to understand that in *Sahara Chronicle* there is a question about the status of human rights and the policies of their application.

There is double normativity in Biemann's video essays: the first regards the structure of the medium; the second concerns the structure of the semantic trace embodied in the medium. The medium is characterized by two important elements: i) its exquisite aesthetic properties, which are achieved by means of great

technical expertise, and ii) the almost total absence of the emotional component. The work doesn't speak to us at the emotional level, and the dyscrasy between the narrated horror and the unemotional way in which it is narrated is so evident that it has to be the outcome of a specific artistic choice. The combination of these two elements makes it so that the semantic trace of Biemann's work is grasped through an evident communicational short circuit: the tragedy is detached from emotions but juxtaposed to the weakness of the normative and theoretical framework of Western culture. From this weakness derives a staggering ethical and political sloth.

After all, Biemann adds nothing to the chronicle of migration: she goes through it, follows it closely, renders it accessible to the audience in a short time. Nevertheless, there is only one way to respond to this artwork, as it demands both a universal and an individual response: we must question the foundations and meaning of Western values and, ultimately, reconsider our idea of humanity.

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